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SUBJECT: PRT Panjshir: The Political Context

REF: KABUL 00452

Summary

11. (SBU) The political dynamics in Panjshir Province are changing. Political standing, in the old paradigm, was based on ones closeness to Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Mujahideen leader assassinated in September 2001. But a new paradigm is emerging. Political clout derives more and more from ones s position in the new institutions of the Bonn process. For the PRT, the heavyweight in day-to-day politics is Governor Bahlul. His main ally among Panjshiris in the central government is Parliament Speaker Qanooni. End Summary.

12. (U) This is the second message of a three-part series. The first (reftel) dealt with the security environment in Panjshir; the third will examine the economic outlook.

Old Paradigm: Massoud

13. (U) Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Mujahideen leader slain two days before 9/11, is a central touchstone for Panjshir politics. He is the Lion of Panjshir. His legacy, like his tomb, dominates the valley. His picture hangs in the office of every local official, sometimes next to President Karzai, sometimes alone. In certain parts of the valley, the reverence approaches cult status. (In the living room of Foreign Minister Abdullah, there are Massoud depictions in large and small photographs, oil paintings, even an etching in marble.)

14. (U) A visit to the Massouds tomb is mandatory for local politicians and foreign dignitaries. The largest gatherings in Panjshir occur around the anniversary of his death, when hundreds congregate. The drive up from Kabul passes through several Massoud arches, including at the mouth of the valley, to remind visitors they are entering Massoud territory. As the Governor, a former comrade of Massoud, put it to us recently, you cant know about Panjshir without Massoud, and about Massoud without Panjshir.

15. (U) Panjshiri contacts tell us that closeness to Massoud during his life determined ones political standing after his death. For example, Marshall Fahim Khan, a key deputy of Massoud, became one of the heavyweights of Panjshir, along with Qanooni and Abdullah. His brother, Zia Massoud, can partly ascribe his rise to first vice president because of his name (if not to his role in the campaigns against the Soviets and Taliban). Several of our sources drew rew our attention to a large convoy, totaling over thirty cars, which traveled to Massouds tomb Jan. 12 during the Eid celebration. They said it transported the political elite of Panjshir: VP Massoud, Meshrano Jirga (MJ-Upper House) member Fahim Khan, General Bismullah Khan, Speaker Qanooni and Governor Bahlul.

16. (U) NDS Chief Amrullah Saleh, another Panjshiri, told the PRT last fall that Panjshiris had three distinguishing sensitivities: their identity was drawn from the Massoud-led resistance; their pride mattered; and their contribution to the Bonn process was considerable and merited respect.

New Paradigm: Bonn

17. (U) Salehs remarks suggest the transition in Panjshir from the old to a new political paradigm. New political forces are arising in Panjshir, anchored

in the institutions of the Bonn process. The Massoud legacy is beginning to fade.

18. (U) At the center of day-to-day politics stands Governor Bahlul. In terms of operational prowess, he is without peer. A Karzai appointment, he has a Massoud connection, but a strained one. He served as one of Massoud's commanders before they had a falling out in the late 1990s, and Bahlul left with his family for Tehran.

19. (SBU) Bahlul cites Speaker Qanooni and VP Massoud as his closest political allies. He coordinates closely with Massoud on issues likely to stir controversy in Panjshir, such as DDR removal of weapons and ammunition. Bahlul told us of his hopes that Qanooni, now elevated to Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga (WJ-Lower House), will become a powerful figure in Kabul looking after Panjshiri interests. The PRT has strong ties to Qanooni's village in Panjshir, where we are building a micro-hydro plant. MJ member Aref is also a close ally of Bahlul, but more in the role of financial backer than political adviser. The PRT has close ties to Aref, from whom we rent one of our houses.

10. (SBU) Tension between Bahlul and Saleh was evident for several months late last year. Saleh,

Bahlul feared, was trying to undercut him in governmental circles. But reportedly a group of high-ranking Panjshiris in Kabul called the two together to bury the hatchet. Criticism of Saleh, once a regular feature of Bahlul's private talks with us, has now ceased.

11. (U) Bahlul has allied himself with the PRT. His public speeches are supportive of the PRT. His standard themes, used at various events before hundreds of Panjshiris, include the following:

The PRT is here to help. It can usher in a new era of prosperity. Its projects, especially the road work, can transform the province. Panjshiris should unite to support it and guarantee its security. The U.S. is not here to occupy, like the Soviets, but to assist. Panjshir forged a strategic partnership with the U.S. in the common struggle against the Soviets and terrorists. Panjshiris should consider the deeds of the PRT, look at its projects, and disregard any anti-PRT propaganda. This is a golden opportunity that only comes once.

12. (SBU) Bahlul told us January 19 that he was confident of the success of two recent undertakings: establishment of the PRT and consolidation of security. Now, he said, he was turning his attention to another pressing matter, the DDR/DIAG process.

13. (SBU) The new Provincial Council represents a Bonn-based political force in Panjshir. Each of its nine members has pledged to work closely with the PRT. One of its members, Abdul Wajeb, has taken pains to help the PRT establish itself in a house in his village of Anabah. A Bahlul ally and former Mujahideen medic, Wajeb has committed himself to help the PRT with community relations and policy issues, like DDR/DIAG. He outlined his understanding of the new political institutions: PC members should bring local concerns to the attention of the provincial and central governments; MJ and WJ members should represent the central government in the provinces.

14. (U) In our talks in the valley, we hear several themes concerning the National Assembly. Some villagers express low expectations about the efficacy of the new parliament. Others tell us they want their representatives not so much to lobby for Panjshir but rather to focus on national interests. Almost all stated their intention to judge the parliament by its deeds, not words.

Comment

15. (SBU) The PRT understands the legend of Massoud and the symbolism of his tomb. And yet Massoud is lionized for the past more than studied for the future. His legacy is fading, in part because he left behind no coherent set of political ideas. The PRT is intent on working with Panjshiri politicians who, with or without a Massoud connection, have an institutional base and an operational capability. For the PRT, Bahlul is the go-to guy for coordination of our activities. The PRT can reinforce the standing of

politicians of the new paradigm by working with them, thus strengthening good governance in the province.

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